

To
Prof. SS. Mantha,
AICTE
Janpath, New Delhi 110001

Sub – AICTE-Microsoft agreement on compulsory use of Office 365 suite

Dear Prof. SS. Mantha,

We, the undersigned, understand from the notification http://www.aicte-india.org/downloads/AICTE_notice%203.pdf that AICTE is **compelling** technical institutions all over the country to use Office 365, a proprietary software product from Microsoft.

We feel it is critical to promote the use of Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) applications in education, and avoid proprietary applications for important pedagogical and political reasons as follows:

1 Freedom to share and customise learning resources is a foundational principle in education

The use of digital learning resources (content) and digital learning software tools/ processes (software applications), needs to be in line with established curricular principles. An important principle in education is that curricular resources need to be publicly owned, so that they are freely available to teachers and students without restrictions.

Proprietary software is prohibited by the vendor, from being studied or shared or modified, using both legal (licensing) and technological (hiding the source code) means. It forces the teacher and the student to be a 'mere user'; treating these resources as a 'given'. It does not allow the needed experimentation, collaborative construction, and local/ contextual enhancement of learning processes; important new opportunities offered by digital technologies, required to meet the constructivist learning ideals aspired for by numerous curricular policy documents. Thus the use of proprietary software is detrimental to this foundational educational principle and AICTE primarily being an academic institution needs to conform to the same.

2 Technical education as the crucible for learning about ICTs

The above principle is particularly critical in the technical education space, where students and teachers need to be able to freely experiment and customise/modify digital resources to develop and deepen their understanding of these technical areas, instead of merely being 'users' of closed software applications. **An automobile engineer needs to be able to open the parts of a automobile and learn how these parts work / interact, and not merely to 'use' the different features of an automobile. Likewise, any student of software engineering, needs to be able to study source code and also make modifications/customisations as an integral part of his/her learning.** Such a study is prohibited by proprietary software.

3 Rich learning environment using public educational software tools

There are public software applications (which by virtue of public ownership are freely shareable and customisable) for all areas where proprietary software applications have been used. At a systemic level, public software has very successful been used in "ICT@schools" program of Kerala, which is now being emulated in Karnataka, Gujarat, Haryana and other states in India. Instead of using a single proprietary application, a rich learning environment is created by using multiple FOSS tools in any domain, (which all conform to open standards to allow inter-operability of

documents). Using multiple applications will help the learner master various aspects of the domain, instead of equating the domain with just a single application (which of course dominant proprietary software vendors would strongly promote, this being in their best commercial interests).

4 Harmful systemic effects of proprietary software

Teachers, colleges and the entire public education system become dependant on the vendor for modifications, enhancements, customisations or localizations (including creating local language versions) to these tools, and have no right to modify or freely share these resources with one another. The agreement would promote vendor lock-in at a systemic level, and would be against the public interest.

5 Potential loss of sovereignty

The political implications of using proprietary software of a US company can also not be ignored, especially in the context of the US legislature considering the CISPA act, which requires US companies to collaborate with US Government in capturing and and sharing digital information for their political and economic goals. The Government of India apparently is studying the use of telecommunications equipment manufactured by Chinese companies from this perspective, and such dangers need not be limited to that country alone.

6 Waste of scarce public funds

Proprietary software applications lock-in users into their proprietary standards. These applications are also expensive. While FOSS equivalent to these applications is easily available, free to share and free of cost. **Periodic upgrades of FOSS applications are also free, whereas each upgrade of proprietary software typically would need to be paid for.** Thus procuring proprietary software is a unnecessary waste of scarce public funds. There cannot be any justification to use proprietary software when publicly owned alternatives are available and used by millions all over the world.

Given these pedagogical, political and economic considerations, Government of India has supported the adoption of FOSS through various policy pronouncements.

7 Government policy support for the adoption of FOSS.

7.1 National Policy on ICTs in education

The National Policy on ICTs in education, which was accepted by CABE in June 2012, clearly emphasises the need to adopt FOSS applications in education, as well as free and open learning resources to create a collaborative and creative ecosystem. **The use of proprietary software, by forbidding sharing and co- creating, clearly harms the possibilities of such a free and open ecosystem.** The policy says "A software environment favouring a pedagogy of learning which promotes active learning, participatory and collaborative practices and sharing of knowledge is essential to nurture a creative society. Free and Open Source Software – operating system and software applications will be preferred in order to expand the range of learning, creation and sharing."

7.2 Open standards in eGovernance

Recognising the dangers from proprietary/ closed standards, the DIT, Government of India has notified, in November 2010, the policy on Open standards in eGovernance in which it has mandated that office documents should be shared only in the ODF format (.odt/.ods/.odp which are the native formats used by openoffice/libreoffice, both free office suite software applications) and not in proprietary formats (.docx/.xlsx/.pptx) used by Microsoft office.

AICTE approval handbook (page 114), itself supports FOSS and this agreement thus violates

AICTEs' own policy as well as national policies.

In addition, the use of publicly owned software has other important advantages:

1. Since publicly owned software applications are free to procure and share, the costs of using freely shareable software applications would be much lower specially for implementing at a large scale, where the necessary support systems are feasible to build. An IIM-Bangalore study estimate that on a conservative basis, India would save 20,000 crores each year by adopting FOSS.
2. The free GNU/Linux operating system is **virus-resistant** and this can hugely reduce maintenance and support efforts and resources. A large number of computers in educational institutions tend to remain unused due to virus issues and using GNU/Linux would increase infrastructure availability.
3. A large number of educational software applications can be bundled free with the GNU/Linux operating system which means they can be available to teachers and institutions schools in a simple single installation process. These includes applications relevant to technical institutions including tools for programming, video/audio/image editing, publishing etc

The agreement may pertain to the use of Office 365 primarily for administrative functions, yet within an academic institution, the software use should be aligned to its basic philosophies of working. Under these circumstance, we request that the agreement with Microsoft should be cancelled and replaced with relevant FOSS application(s).

We look forward to your response and to further discussing this important issue.

Yours truly,

Signatories (PTO)

May 1, 2013

Copy : Minister for Education, MHRD, Government of India
Secretary for Education, MHRD, Government of India.

Enclosed –

1. National Policy on ICTs in education, March 2012 (excerpt) (Available on: http://www.itforchange.net/sites/default/files/ITfC/revised_policy%20document%20ofICT.pdf)
2. Policy on open standards in e-governance, DIT, GoI (Available on: http://egovstandards.gov.in/review-documents/public-review/IFEG-Phase-I/Draft_for_public_review_Report_PhaseI_v_0_6_2010Nov23.pdf)
3. Cisca bill on cyber security passed by the US House, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-22213379>

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